

VZCZCXRO9788
PP RUEHROV
DE RUEHDJ #0412/01 1191400
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
P 281400Z APR 08
FM AMEMBASSY DJIBOUTI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9198
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHAE/AMEMBASSY ASMARA PRIORITY 2290
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/CJTF HOA PRIORITY
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 DJIBOUTI 000412

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR AF, AF/E, AND INR/AA
CJTF-HOA FOR POLAD
LONDON, PARIS, ROME FOR AFRICA-WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/27/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [MOPS](#) [PBTS](#) [PHSA](#) [ER](#) [DJ](#)

SUBJECT: DJIBOUTI-ERITREA: ACTING DEFENSE CHIEF REPORTS ON
BORDER TALKS WITH ERITREAN MILITARY

REF: DJIBOUTI 393 AND PREVIOUS (NOTAL)

Classified By: ERIC WONG, DCM. REASON: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (S/NF) SUMMARY. Djibouti's Acting Chief of Defense, MG Zakaria Cheikh Ibrahim, reports that an April 24 meeting with the Eritrean military resulted in an agreement to establish a buffer zone (along disputed territory in Ras Doumeira), but that such a zone had not been implemented. However, MG Zacharia indicated a DJ/ER working group would meet to address implementation. While Djibouti seeks a peaceful resolution to the situation on the border, it has reportedly devoted nearly half its military forces to the area. Separately, France reports that it has approached the Eritrean government in both Asmara and Paris to address this situation "quietly," believing that bilateral discussions between Djibouti and Eritrea have not yet been exhausted. Should bilateral talks fail, then Djibouti could raise the issue at the African Union or the United Nations. According to the French Ambassador, while 19th century French archival documents do not indicate agreement on demarcation of the border, Eritrean fortifications and coastal trenches at Ras Doumeira are "clearly on Djibouti's side." END SUMMARY.

¶2. (S/NF) RDML Greene, Commander, Combined Joint Task Force - Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) met with Djibouti's Acting Chief of Defense, MG Zakaria Cheikh Ibrahim on April 27. Embassy Security Assistance Officer (SAO) (note-taker) and CJTF-HOA Country Coordination Element (CJTF-HOA CCE) accompanied RDML Greene. MG Zakaria requested the meeting to exchange information with RDML Greene upon his return from regional travel. The main topic of the discussion was the recent border incursion by Eritrea in the coastal area of Doumeira. MG Zakaria thanked RDML Greene for providing imagery and expressed an interest in receiving similar products if the situation worsened. MG Zakaria also requested order of battle and capabilities information on the Eritrean Armed Forces, saying that his most recent assessment was from 2000.

BUFFER ZONE REPORTEDLY AGREED ON, BUT NOT IMPLEMENTED

¶3. (S/NF) MG Zakaria said that he met with an Eritrean military leader on April 24, and that they had agreed to establish a buffer zone, but that it had not been executed. However, MG Zacharia indicated a DJ/ER working group would meet to address implementation. MG Zakaria said that in some

cases Eritrean and Djiboutian troops were separated by as little as twenty meters. He said that approximately 45 per cent of Djibouti's army was devoted to the northern district.

(NOTE: This translates into 2,000-2,500 troops, out of a total of 6,000 forces in the entire Djiboutian military, or more than double the number normally stationed in the northern Obock district. END NOTE.) Finally, MG Zakaria expressed bewilderment concerning Eritrea's intentions and motivations, stressing that Djibouti had always worked hard to cooperate with its neighbors, and that Djibouti would seek a peaceful resolution to the situation on the border.

FRANCE: IF BILATERAL TALKS FAIL, RECOURSE TO THE AU AND UN

¶4. (S/NF) In a separate meeting on April 27, French Ambassador to Djibouti Dominique DeCherf told DCM and GRPO that France had approached the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) in both Asmara and Paris, and had urged the GSE on April 25 to seek to reduce tensions quietly. DeCherf confirmed that Eritrean and Djiboutian officials had met on April 24, and that thus bilateral efforts continued. In the event that bilateral discussions failed, one could then approach the African Union's Peace and Security Council (AU PSC), he said, to urge it to dispatch a fact-finding mission. After the AU, one could bring the matter to the United Nations; however, he underscored, bilateral approaches between Djibouti and Eritrea had not yet been exhausted.

TRENCHES AND FORTIFICATIONS "CLEARLY ON DJIBOUTI'S SIDE"

DJIBOUTI 00000412 002 OF 002

¶5. (S/NF) DeCherf said that according to French archival documents from 1892 and 1897, provided to Djibouti, no boundary had been agreed on. The border between Djibouti and Eritrea, at Ras Doumeira, was not physically demarcated, but followed the watershed ("la ligne de crete"), DeCherf said.

¶6. (S/NF) Road construction at Ras Doumeira was not a surprise, DeCherf said, noting that even the European Union had previously discussed the need to improve the road between Obock and Moulhoule (i.e., 15 km south of Ras Doumeira, within Djibouti). Djibouti and Eritrea had agreed on improving the road to Ras Doumeira, although Djibouti had not made any improvements on its side of the road. However, Eritrea had also built fortifications out of rock on Ras Doumeira itself, creating "trenches, out of stone, clearly on Djibouti's side," DeCherf said.

¶7. (S/NF) DeCherf cited the GSE's interest in seeking to control the outflow of emigrants from Eritrea as a possible motive for its establishing a military presence at Ras Doumeira.

¶8. (S/NF) COMMENT. The reported agreement between Djibouti and Eritrea to establish a buffer zone at Ras Doumeira is welcome news, but it remains to be seen whether the GSE will implement it. Logistical challenges and limited resources will not allow Djibouti to sustain keeping 45 per cent of its small military deployed along its northeastern border with Eritrea. Some Djiboutians observe that the two countries exchanged gunfire (and casualties) over the same area in 1994, and that tensions in 1994 and 1996 subsided only after a show of military force by the French (e.g., the deployment of the "Charles de Gaulle" aircraft carrier in 1994, when significant French forces had been deployed to Rwanda). The French Ambassador's comments on bilateral talks suggest a French show of force in response to current tensions is unlikely. In response to MG Zakaria's request to RDML Greene, Post supports the release to Djibouti of updated USG assessments on Eritrean capabilities and order of battle. END COMMENT.

